PGH POST-GAZETTE (2-28-78), 1

Wecht Pays $5,000 To Settle Libel Suit

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One of Coroner Cyril H. Wecht's fiery letters has cost him $5,000.

Wecht yesterday reached an out-of-court settlement of a defamation and libel suit filed against him by former Assistant District Attorney Mark F. Geary.

Geary, a Republican who worked for the district attorney's office for five years until he was fired in June, 1975, charged Wecht pressured his boss, then District Attorney John J. Hickton, into firing him.

When the suit was first filed in 1975, damages of $220,000 were sought but just as the case was due for a jury trial yesterday, a $5,000 settlement was reached.

Geary served as the 1973 camgaign manager for Dr. Ralph J. Stalter, Republican nominee for county coroner and Wecht's opponent that year.

According to the original suit, following the campaign Wecht began lobbying for Geary's firing in retaliation for his Republican loyalties and opposition to Wecht.

Wecht is a Democrat and is currently circulating petitions to run for chairman of the Allegheny County Democratic Party.

The final blowup occurred in May, 1975 when Geary forced one of Wecht's pathologists, Dr. Howard Reidbord, to wait for an hour before testifying for the prosecution in a murder trial.

At the time of the delay, he reportedly told Reidbord that "we all have to make sacrifices."

Wecht complained, charging Geary with disrespect for his office and disregard for his valuable staff, and wrote Geary a letter, part of which stated:

"Unlike you Mr. Geary, my definition and pursuit of professionalism remains constant, whether the D.A. is a crooked enemy like Robert Duggan or an honest friend like Jack Hickton."

Duggan, also a Republican, preceded Hickton as district attorney.

Wecht frequently writes hot letters to political foes, editorial writers, television announcers and just about anybody who he thinks deserves one.

After the letter to Geary, Hickton reportedly told his assistant to clear up the situation with Wecht. A few weeks later, the situation not cooled, Geary was fired.

At the time, Hickton, who had just lost the Democratic nomination for district attorney, denied any pressure was applied to fire Geary.

Geary was fired for insubordination, the official statement said.

Geary charged Wecht with interference with his contractual relationship with his boss, loss of wages and defamation and libel, citing the letter as the main offense.

Geary is now in private law practice here.

MARK F. GEARY

CYRIL WECHT